

A Prophet Never Has Power

Ezekiel 2:2-5; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Mark 6:1-6

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In his Mexican hometown, a humble farmworker never has to present himself at the police station, much less in a courtroom. Here in the US, however, he has to stand before the immigration judge. He doesn't speak a word of English, just his hometown Spanish. He stands all alone to hear the verdict.

Given their background, it's understandable that the majority of such farmworkers prefer to avoid the courts altogether by moving from State to State to escape the authorities.

But the farmworker about whom I now speak stood his ground and showed up for his hearing. He stood with dignity, and without fear, He knew he had not committed a crime. Yes, he had crossed the border illegally, but he had done so only because he could not support his family in his own country. Without more argument than his own hopes and dreams he challenged the North American judge in silence.

Every migrant man and woman is a living expression of a prophetic cry. His or her very life is prophecy. Prophecy which goes unheard, a cry without echo...but not without effect. And yet...where is its force?

During recent months the migrant population has been pursued and persecuted by the officials of ICE (=Immigration and Customs Enforcement). No day goes by without a group of workers calling us migrant ministers to say they have been arrested. We get on the move without delay, but the only thing we accomplish is to stand with them before the migration authorities. And every evening we take stock of our powerlessness and frustration. We could not do anything to help...

But at the same time in everyone who passes through this process (of arrest, incarceration, sentencing, and deportation) there seems to be activated that sharp realization expressed by Ezequiel, that most authentic of prophets: "And those, whether they heed or resist...will know that a prophet has been among them."

The lives of migrants stand scandalously as the weakest element in this technically sophisticated society, with its pretensions to an invincibly authentic democratic identity. Migrant men and women again make clear what the disciples learned: "Power is made perfect in weakness." There is no better description of the prophetic figure than what is offered in our Biblical texts for today, for the texts speak of people who are free, without fetters. People who know that something is not working as God wants it to. People almost always called from the village and whose life is the field. They defend no power-interest, nor do they try to grab fame. They know or suspect that authority represents the interests of those who already have power and that this entire system is based on injustice.

And yet it is not the case that either the immigration judge or the ICE officials have evil intentions. Their job is to uphold the law. The problem is that they do not question the law, and they do not do so because they are part of the power that created them. That is why the migrant farmworker experiences freedom, because he is not tied into migratory law as its creator or beneficiary. What moves the farmworker is the life imperative. That is why his very presence becomes a prophetic cry that challenges the law.

Those who deny Jesus' mission in his hometown represent in various ways the interests of the domination system. "This well-known fellow can't be allowed to put in doubt the synagogue's legality!"— and therefore Jesus is not truly known at all. His prophetic effectiveness is seen more clearly in what he cannot do than in what he can.

Nor will the prophetic presence of the migrant community among us pass away unperceived...it too will cause an impact on North American society. But how it will do so, when it will do so...

Take the farmworker, the prophet I spoke of above: He does not know the answer to these questions. He senses, though, that it is God who will bring about the justice he believes in, that it is God who will sustain him in the strength of his patience and waiting...